

# LEAPING OVER POTHOLES? THE ROAD AHEAD FOR TOURISM IN INDIA'S BORDERLANDS

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## ABSTRACT

*India has been underscoring the transformative potential of cross-border partnerships in tourism for the Northeast. But whatever the glossy brochures may proclaim, initiatives taken in the name of the Northeast seldom ask the question to what extent the border region will benefit from these. The paper argues that the fixation with the economic potential of tourism has meant that this growth has often sidestepped the lives of borderland communities, bringing few economic opportunities to the region. Designed as an alternative model of borderlands tourism, it has the potential to bring tourism-generated revenues directly to the rural communities with the potential to diversify and restructure mountain economies.*

## PAVED WITH (ONLY) INTENTIONS?

India has been underscoring the transformative potential of cross-border partnerships in the field of tourism for the Northeast. The government recently announced plans to double the tourism growth in Northeast India over the next three years. It is not difficult to understand why. The Northeast presents a picture postcard collage with its rich fare of festivals, monasteries, temples and churches, verdant tea gardens, mighty rivers, deep forests, diverse ecological zones and even more diverse peoples. From the only floating national park in Keibul Lamjao in Manipur to the high altitude biosphere reserve park in the Khangchendzonga in Sikkim to Gyaker Sinyi, the natural lake in Arunachal Pradesh, to Sibasagar, the ancient capital of the Ahoms in Assam or the Krem Mawmluh caves in Meghalaya, marketing the Northeast offers spectacular choice. There are plans to connect Northeast India to the well-established tourism networks of Southeast Asia. The Greater Mekong Sub-Region represents an example of a successful transnational tourism regime, designed for joint marketing of tour programmes in the region.<sup>1</sup> Picture perfect? Not quite.

## WHERE ARE THE ROADS?

But whatever the glossy brochures may proclaim, the numbers tell a story of their own. While India hosted 8.89 million tourists (as against China's 56.9 million) in 2016, the Northeast region received only an estimated 0.5 per cent of all foreign tourists. (Northeast Today, 2017) What is curious is that initiatives taken in the name of the Northeast seldom ask the question to what extent the border region will benefit from it. Despite the fact that the Northeast is being projected as the gateway to Southeast Asia, the condition of border infrastructure is certainly not for the faint hearted. The expansion of national highways in the region is a classic instance of aiming low and hitting lower. The East West Corridor, a 670 km long four-lane highway from Srirampur on the Assam-West Bengal border stops at Silchar in southern Assam and there is not even a two-lane highway beyond it. It an estimated 14 hours to travel the 189 kms from Mizoram's capital Aizawl to the frontier district town of Champai. (Shyam Kishor, 2018) Far more forbidding than the landlocked status of the Northeast is the fact that each of these states suffers the double disadvantage of being 'internally locked', 'themselves locked and locking out others, unable to connect with each other physically in terms of poor transport links, and more seriously unable to make connections intellectually and emotionally with their closest neighbours, or even with and among their own people'. (Prabhakara 2004:4606) Internal rail connectivity within the Northeast has been in an abysmal state with the region having no rail network barring Assam

<sup>1</sup>For instance, the Heritage Necklace Circuit today links the six heritage sites of Siem Reap in Cambodia, Hue in Vietnam, Luang Prabang in Laos, Bagan in Myanmar, Sukhothai in Thailand and Lijiang in Yunnan, China.

and parts of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. As part of a long-standing programme of rail upgradation, the Union Budget of 2017-18 set a target of achieving broad-gauge rail connectivity to all capitals of the Northeast by 2020. (Economic Times, 2017).

### CLOSING THE INFRASTRUCTURE GAP

India is seeking to close the infrastructure gap by developing a set of key cross-border transport corridors in the subregion. (Kurian 2014) These include restoration of several rail links between India and Bangladesh that was operational till 1965 are on the anvil. For instance, India is funding the construction of a \$51 million, 14-km long railway link between Agartala with Akhaura, the southeastern border town of Bangladesh. The Agartala-Akhaura project expected to be completed by the end of 2019, promises to bring multiple benefits to the Northeast. For example, the distance between Agartala and Kolkata through Guwahati is 1,650 km but the link through Bangladesh will reduce this to just 350 kms. India and Bangladesh have also agreed in principle to revive the rail link between Chilahati, a border railway station in Bangladesh with Haldibari in West Bengal. Some sections of this rail route are already functional requiring relatively modest costs to reestablish connectivity on this sector. This route also offers Bangladesh faster connectivity with Bhutan and Nepal. For instance, Hashimara in West Bengal bordering Bhutan is only 182 kms from Chilahati and a travel time of three hours by train. Transit time to Nepal too stands to be drastically reduced. Similarly, Jogobani, an Indian railway point in Bihar is only 52 kms from Chilahati. Another proposed link between Kulaura in Bangladesh and Mahishashan in Assam will open a trade route between Assam's Barak valley and Bangladesh. India is also building three rail lines to Bhutan linking Assam and West Bengal with Bhutan. But while transborder connectivity is vital, it will be equally important to address the lack of institutional connectivity, which has also worked to keep levels of mobility below potential. A sobering reminder is the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa road linking Manipur to Myanmar, is a stark reminder of a road that, without critical backward and forward linkages, leads nowhere and benefits only a thriving traffic in smuggling.

### BYPASSED BY THE BOOM?

The fixation with the economic potential of tourism has also meant that this growth has often sidestepped the lives of borderland communities, bringing few economic

opportunities to the region. While the promotion of a model of mass tourism has undoubtedly seen an expansion of tourism revenues and footfalls, interventions that do not respect the supply potential of mountain ecologies are creating and reinforcing interlocking webs of environmental and socio-economic vulnerability. This also raises larger questions of defining the limits of acceptable use, particularly given the recent surge that the Northeast has seen in domestic tourist arrivals. If (re) designed as an alternative model of borderlands tourism, it has the potential to bring tourism-generated revenues directly to the rural communities and help diversify and restructure mountain economies. For instance, planned well, rural home stays can be designed in winter months so as to not disrupt rural agricultural calendars as well as also provide them with additional income-generating activities. (Sikkim Now 2009) This can effectively alleviate the otherwise enormous pressure on local infrastructure during the peak summer seasons. Such community-based tourism projects hold the potential to look into questions of income generation, job creation, safety, crime and underline the need for 'situated development' that responds to local particularities. A unique conservation initiative launched in Arunachal Pradesh in 2008 promotes sustainable wetlands tourism by making monasteries take the lead in the preservation of high altitude wetlands like the Bangajan. The three-year WWF project called Saving Wetlands Sky High also engages the monasteries in waste disposal activities so as to ensure that tourism does not impact the wetlands adversely. It is only when tourism as a sector begins to address such questions that it can create enabling spaces for communities to partake of these opportunities as well as benefits.

Tourism, like myriad other flows will hinge critically on how a border region is (re) imagined in the national narrative. Borderland tourism needs to evolve beyond the simplistic mix-and-stir-model of throwing resources at a region and merely charting spikes in tourist arrivals. This will in turn hinge essentially on two overlapping concerns, namely the extent to which policy acknowledges that communities and sustainable tourism resource management are inseparable and that cross-border partnerships constitute a critical corollary to sustainable tourism. An apt imagery for borderlands tourism would be to imagine the road ahead, not as a linear one but one with several forks and bends, each replete with local narratives.

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